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ABSTRACT

A developmentally appropriate early child classroom is described as one offering children organized activity choices, opportunities to explore content areas, and a time structure encouraging learning from one another and from adults in one-to-one and small group contexts. In addition, teachers would employ assessment practices related directly to curriculum planning, corresponding to the actual learning experiences of children, and taking into account individual differences. This study evaluates the Teacher Training Project, which emphasizes the foregoing practices. Interviews were conducted with nine preschool and nine kindergarten teachers, all of whom had completed the two-year Teacher Training Project. The interview questions emphasized changes made in the classroom environment, schedule, and curriculum; focused on teachers' understanding of how children learn, goals for students, the teacher's classroom role, and how student learning is assessed. Results suggest that teachers who participated in the Teacher Training Project implemented developmentally appropriate practice in their classes. They made changes in the classroom environment, the structure of the day, the types of activities available to children, and assessment procedures. (LL)

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Teachers' Reports on Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practice

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The research reported in this paper represents part of an evaluation study of the Teacher Training Project, which was developed and is being conducted by Early Childhood Resources, 50 El Camino Drive, Corte Madera, CA 94925. The evaluation is being funded by the Stuart Foundations.

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Teachers' Reports on Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Although a general definition of developmentally appropriate practice has been provided by Bredekamp (1987), there appears to be considerable variation in practitioners' understanding of it. Nonetheless, even with such variation one would expect that a developmentally appropriate classroom would offer children clearly organized activity choices, the opportunity to explore content areas (e.g., language and communication or the physical world) in an integrated way, and a structure of time that enables them to learn from one another and adults in one-to-one and small group contexts. In addition, one would expect to see assessment practices that relate directly to curriculum planning, correspond to the actual learning experiences of children, and take into account individual differences among children. The foregoing practices were emphasized in the "Teacher Training Project". The core of this training program for teachers was the High/Scope curriculum; other elements of the training program were drawn from sources such as NAEYC.

The educational approach utilized by preschool and kindergarten teachers prior to participating in the Teacher Training Project mainly consisted of unstructured play, large group activities, and skill learning through drills and workbooks. Moreover, the kindergarten teachers typically relied on standardized assessment procedures that bore little or no relationship to the classroom curriculum. Through an interview study two

years after participation in the Teacher Training Project, we were able to document the elements of developmentally appropriate practice these teachers attempted to implement in their classrooms and the ways in which they influenced their school districts' policies and practices. In addition, we investigated the extent to which their curriculum priorities corresponded to those of the Teacher Training Project.

Method

Nine preschool and nine kindergarten teachers representing ten different school districts in a large metropolitan area were interviewed in this study. About one-half of the teachers taught in urban school districts and the other half in suburban districts. All of the teachers had completed the two-year Teacher Training Project. In the first year they participated in seven two-day training sessions and one one-day session, and in the second year two two-day sessions and two one-day sessions. During both years they received follow-up support through bi-monthly visits by one of the trainers to each of their classrooms.

Teachers who had completed the training program were contacted by letter and asked to participate in the interview study. Ninety percent of the teachers returned a card indicating a willingness to be interviewed. A research assistant then arranged to interview the teachers by telephone. Each interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

The interview consisted of twelve open-ended questions. Teachers were asked to describe changes they made in their classroom environment, schedule, and curriculum as a result of information and ideas they received from the Teacher Training Project. Questions also focused on the teachers' understanding of the way children learn, their goals for students, how they see their role in the classroom, and how they assess student learning. Finally, information was sought on how teachers have influenced policies and practices within their schools and school districts. Once the interviews were completed, a research assistant who was not involved with the interview process categorized the teachers' responses. A second person did a reliability check on a subset of the teacher interviews. Percent agreement resulting from the reliability check ranged from 74% to 100% with a mean percent agreement of 88%.

Results

Most of the teachers reported that the training experience led to major changes in their classrooms. When asked about the classroom environment, sixty-six percent of the teachers indicated that areas, objects, and materials are now labeled extensively and systematically. Both words and symbols, e.g., pictures, were cited as examples of labels. Fifty percent of the teachers stated that their classrooms now have clearly defined activity areas, and forty-four percent reported that materials are more accessible to children. In describing how they structure a typical day, sixty-six percent indicated that they have

started to allocate substantial time for small group activities and sixty-one percent mentioned setting aside more time for child-initiated activity. With respect to the curriculum, forty-four percent of the teachers specifically mentioned that they have recently de-emphasized the mastery of isolated skills.

In response to a question about their present role in the classroom, seventy-two percent of the teachers characterized themselves as a facilitator. Most teachers (83%) stated that children learn through being actively involved with materials and construct knowledge through their own experimentation and exploration. When asked about educational goals they have for children, the teachers much more frequently identified children's forming a self-image as learners rather than mastering specific skills. Eighty-eight percent of the teachers indicated that they now use some form of authentic assessment (e.g., portfolios, anecdotal records, or observations). Many added that they use information obtained through this type of assessment activity to guide changes in the curriculum and to individualize planning for each child.

Although the Teacher Training Project had its greatest effect on the classroom practices of teachers, there was some evidence that indirect effects spread beyond the classroom. Almost all of the training participants (94%) have discussed developmentally appropriate practice with colleagues, and sixty-six percent have also done so with their principal or immediate supervisor. In addition, sixty-six percent of the teachers reported either conducting or organizing a workshop on developmentally appropriate practice for other teachers in their school district. As for the school districts' responses to the

teachers' implementation activities, thirty-three percent of the teachers stated that their supervisors and other school administrators have been verbally supportive; twenty-two percent said that all the preschool and kindergarten classrooms in their school district are shifting toward developmentally appropriate practice; and another sixteen percent reported that their school district is planning a district-wide change in the kindergarten curriculum.

Discussion

Generally speaking, the teachers who participated in the Teacher Training Project attempted to implement developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms. They made changes in the classroom environment, the structure of the day, the types of activities available to children, and assessment procedures. The kinds of changes the teachers talked about introducing in their classrooms corresponded closely with the objectives and emphases of the Teacher Training Project. The teachers not only implemented key elements of the training content, but two years after completing training were able to articulate a philosophy that is consonant with that of the Teacher Training Project.

With an increasing number of scholars in early education calling for the implementation of developmentally appropriate practice (Karweit, 1992; Burts et al., 1990; Hyson et al., 1990), one of the challenges facing the field is to devise training

strategies that effectively help teachers learn and put into practice what is often a completely new educational approach for them. The findings in this study suggest that regular intensive training sessions over the course of two years enable preschool and kindergarten teachers to alter their classroom practices. It is noteworthy that the training program was off-site and included periodic follow-up by a trainer in their classrooms. In addition, the training setting nurtured the development of collaborative relationships among training participants from different schools. A context was created that gave teachers a network of specialists and colleagues to whom they could turn as they experimented with major changes in their classrooms over an extended period of time. Other studies have shown that such a context is what teachers need to implement change successfully (Fullen, 1991).

The effects of the training also appeared to go beyond the classroom. Because all of the teachers who participated in the Teacher Training Project came from a different school, each one of them became a spokesperson for developmentally appropriate practice and stimulated interest in it among colleagues and school administrators. Workshops were organized and often conducted by the trained teachers. In a substantial number of cases the teachers inspired shifts in the school districts' early childhood and early primary policies and curriculum guidelines. Thus, this study indicates that giving individual teachers intensive training in developmentally appropriate practice may be an effective means to initiate programmatic change within a school or even a school district.

Finally, in-depth research on the implementation of developmentally appropriate practice is needed to supplement interview studies such as the present one. As different approaches to training early childhood and early primary teachers are instituted, self-reports from teachers combined with classroom observational data will enable the field to understand the effects of training on teachers, their classrooms, their students, and their schools. With this thought in mind, we are moving ahead with conducting a series of case studies of classrooms and schools whose teachers are currently participating in the Teacher Training Project.

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